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Crisis: journalism, democracy, and the downfall of the White House Press Secretary, 1990 to the present

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**Crisis: Journalism, Democracy, and the Downfall of the White House Press Secretary, 1990
to the Present**

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Since the end of World War II the White House Press Secretary has been one of the most visible figures in a President's administration. The Press Secretary goes in front of the media nearly every day to answer questions about the President's schedule and agenda. But throughout the past four years the James S. Brady Briefing Room has been eerily quiet, holding no White House press briefings for more than 400 days. President Donald Trump is currently on his fourth Press Secretary, each one seemingly more combative than the rest. Throughout his tenure as President, Trump has proclaimed the media "the enemy of the American people" numerous times, first occurring on February 17th, 2017 shortly after the former celebrity took office.¹ President Trump's contempt for journalists has largely driven the absence of a Press Secretary at the podium daily, making one of the most esteemed roles in the White House nothing more than the propaganda arm of the West Wing.

Presidents have always had frustrations with how the media covers their administration but since the Clinton administration the relationship between the press and the President has deteriorated so much that civil political discourse is nearly impossible. No single actor can be blamed, not the President, nor the press, but a complex interplay of factors that have created a crisis of journalism and the presidency. Ultimately, this has significantly altered the role and function of the White House Press Secretary. New technology and a deteriorating relationship between the press and President has made Presidents increasingly go outside of traditional media to communicate directly to the American people, rendering the Press Secretary not as valuable as it once was.

¹Trump Tweet Feb 17th, 2017. Official citation coming. Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), The FAKENEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN,) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!" February, 17th, 2017, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/832708293516632065>.

The role of Press Secretary was created in 1933 by President Franklin Roosevelt, he appointed his close friend and adviser Stephen Early. Early had previously been a White House Secretary in charge of public relations. This was the first time that a President had placed a secretary solely in charge of the media. Much of what we know of the Press Secretary we know today, its function and roles, was because of Early. Early developed a publicity machine that propelled Roosevelt to his second term and beyond. Early biographer Linda Levin believes that if it weren't for Early that "Roosevelt might have found the hostility of most of the national paper publishers too much of an obstacle to overcome..."²

The role of White House Press Secretary is an extremely difficult one. To go to the podium every day and answer the questions of an adversarial media can be extremely taxing. The chief function of the Press Secretary is to portray the President's message in the best way possible. Author Woody Klein describes this as "spinning the news." The dissemination of news from the White House is carefully spun to present the President in the best possible light. But "spinning" the news can be interpreted in a very different way, one that sees the Press Secretary, and in turn the President, as lying or shying away from the truth. This speaks to the role of Press Secretary, for they serve two masters. For a Press Secretary to be effective they must be an advocate for a free and open press, while also being trusted by their boss, and employer, the President. Without credibility from either of these masters the Press Secretary is wholly ineffective.

President Trump's first Press Secretary Sean Spicer describes the lengths to which the Trump administration went to change the traditional White House Briefing protocol. Spicer

²Linda Levin, *The Making of FDR: The Story of Stephen T. Early, America's First Modern Press Secretary* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2008) 10.

describes four changes that were significant. First, Spicer gave the first question of the briefing to a *New York Post* reporter. It was tradition to give the first question to the reporter from the *Associated Press*. Spicer sent the message that the “days of the establishment media dominating the briefing were over.”³ Second, Spicer made a significant effort to go beyond establishment media and give questions to regional papers. Third, the traditional daily press briefing was around 45 minutes long, the briefing would end by reporters thanking the Press Secretary. During the first briefing given by Spicer, when reporters thanked him he brushed it aside and decided to continue on. Spicer described this as further signifying that he and the administration were taking control of the briefing room. Finally, Spicer began adding “Skype seats” which would bring in journalists from around the country, mostly regional media organizations that Spicer believed were being left out. What all of these points signal too is that Spicer, and the Trump administration, were now taking control of the press briefing. But Spicer’s innovations are not unique to the Trump administration.

Rather, the communication operation employed by the Trump administration has become standard operation for the Republican Party for the majority of the twentieth century. There are two key elements of these operations. First, is the conscious attempts to deceive the electorate through lies and disinformation. Historically, this can be traced back to the Joseph McCarthy era and his hunt for communists in government. Numerous comparisons can be made between Donald Trump and Joseph McCarthy, their ability to build coalitions based on false grievances, also in the words of Richard Rovere, political journalist during the McCarthy era “His tongue was loose and always wagging; he would say anything that came into his head and worry later, if

³Sean Spicer, *The Briefing: Politics, The Press, and The President* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2018), 138.

at all, about defending what he had said.”⁴ Rovere was discussing McCarthy but Trump quickly comes to mind when reading the quote. But these comparisons need to be seen in a larger context, one that sees the entire Republican Party in this light.

The second tenet of the communication operations of the Republican Party is the failure to recognize the legitimacy of democratically elected Presidents. Looking back at McCarthy, he was making a conscious attempt to delegitimize President Truman and his government by exploiting Cold War fears of communists within government. In a memorandum about McCarthy, Truman speaks on the Republicans decision in 1952 to have McCarthy speak at the Republican National Convention. Truman discusses this decision from two angles, first wondering how the party “whose members boast so long and loud that they are the moral and spiritual descendants of Abraham Lincoln” give a man as vile as McCarthy a platform as big as a national convention. On the other hand, if the previous statement is the case, then “why...have we heard no slightest word of any disavowal of this disreputable character assassin and his disreputable tactics?”⁵ The answer to Truman’s question here is easily identifiable. Despite the fact that most moderate republicans were discomfited by McCarthy, the parties’ leadership believed that he would lead to success at the polls. Political scientist Jo Freeman sees this as a key tenet of the Republican Party where “deference is paid to the leadership, activists are expected to be ‘good soldiers.’”⁶ McCarthy was given the platform by his Republican allies,

⁴ Andrew Gelman, “Donald Trump and Joe McCarthy,” Statistical Modeling, Casual Inference, and Social Science (blog), June 8th, 2016, <https://statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/2016/06/08/donald-trump-and-joe-mccarthy/>.

⁵ President Harry Truman Memorandum, “Memorandum Regarding Senator Joseph McCarthy,” *Harry S. Truman Library*, White House File, President Truman’s Confrontation with McCarthyism, Memorandum Regarding Senator Joe McCarthy, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/memorandum-regarding-senator-joseph-mccarthy?documentid=NA&pagenumber=5>.

⁶ Jo Freeman, “The Political Culture of the Democratic and Republican Parties,” *The Academy of Political Science* 101, no. 3 (1986): 329, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2151619>.

whether they disagreed with him or not, to spread lies and disinformation that ultimately severely damaged the lives of a lot of government workers.⁷

The fear of communists in government and figureheads such as Joseph McCarthy defined republicanism in the twentieth century. More broadly the use of figureheads and hot-button issues have been employed by the Republican Party to delegitimize democratic Presidents and divide and set the electorate against each other. Political Scientist Joel Olsen posits that these developments emerged after the Civil Rights victories of the 1960s, as white people lost their perceived racialized superiority they attempted to find a way to regain it. To mobilize, the GOP would create a narrative that called its' supporters the "virtuous middle" while deeming the opposing party "as the party of intellectual elites and undeserving rabble."⁸ Ultimately what this created was a further split voter base that "created an incentive for each party to bundle positions on racial issues with hot-button 'cultural issues.'"⁹ The re-organization of the electorate pitted the two sides against each other, setting up the strict partisan divide that developed over the next decades. Through the use of lies, deception, and character assassination the Republican Party has found success in deceiving and dividing the electorate to serve their own purposes and aid in the ignition of a culture war that has only gotten worse in the twenty-first century. For the purposes of this article, the presidencies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama are observed and it is clear that the Republican Party would stop at nothing to obstruct the two administration's policies, not solely based on political divide, but often through ad-hominem propaganda against the politician themselves.

⁷ This issue is discussed in depth in *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* by Landon Storrs.

⁸ Joel Olsen, "Whiteness and the Polarization of American Politics," *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (Dec. 2008): 704, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/20299771>.

⁹ Olsen, "Whiteness and the Polarization of American Politics," 704.

As technology has advanced into the Age of Information, the tools of deception and deceit have only grown, enabling politicians to go around traditional media to provide their own narrative on politicians and current events. This is a significant change from historical precedent where previously there was very limited access to varied sources of news content. For television three large networks dominated the airwaves, outside of that there were newspapers and newsmagazines that did their best to provide objective journalism. But as media scholar and journalist Matthew Pressman describes, this is not the first time that objective journalism has come under attack. Pressman describes that the first threat that objective journalism faced almost led to the end of it altogether, but as attacks came from both sides of the political aisle, it “convinced the people in charge of the country’s leading news organizations to stay the course — to remain committed to impartial, balanced reporting and to keep opinions out of news stories.”¹⁰ As journalism finds itself in yet another crisis as it comes under attack from the President, among other prominent politicians, objective journalism will need to adjust once again, because as Pressman describes, after the first attack on objective journalism it led to a “golden age of journalism.” But until then, the Age of Information’s news content will, most often, be driven by the politicians themselves, as they amass millions of followers on social media.

President Trump has taken his administration’s communication operations into his own hands through the use of the social media app, Twitter. As mentioned previously, Trump has on numerous occasions attacked the media for how they have treated him. In response to this, the President has taken to Twitter to announce policies, new cabinet members, and his schedule.

¹⁰Matthew Pressman, “Journalistic Objectivity Evolved the Way it Did for a Reason,” *Time Magazine*, November 5th, 2018, <https://time.com/5443351/journalism-objectivity-history/>.

This represents a profound break with historical precedent. Over the past three decades Presidents have increasingly circumvented traditional media in attempt to avoid adversarial coverage and reach a wider audience to gather support for their policies. This has created two major institutional changes that have reshaped American politics.

The first of these institutional changes is how politics is now enacted in Washington. Prior to the 1990s, although Washington was not a beacon of hope for bipartisanship, there was more of a sense of collaboration. Presidential rhetoric has transformed from a tool of persuading the House of Representatives and Senate to get bills passed to an emotional tool of popular persuasion.¹¹ Presidential rhetoric, in addition to Presidents increasingly going outside traditional media has created what Sidney Blumenthal calls the “permanent campaign.” The permanent campaign occupies a unique space between governing and campaigning where one of its goals is to rally public support that can be used to pressure Congress to implement Presidential policies.¹² The concept of the permanent campaign originated in 1976 in a memo sent by Pat Caddell to President Jimmy Carter. Some scholars believe that the concept behind the permanent campaign goes even further back to 1968 under President Johnson. Two other important parts of the permanent campaign are the prioritization of short term goals over long term strategy and the use of modern technology and data to determine the best course of action for a President to take. Undoubtedly, Presidents Carter, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush utilized the permanent campaign ideas but the concept really started to take off under President Bill Clinton and has only become more prevalent since.

¹¹ Stephanie Martin, ed., *Columns to Characters: The Presidency and the Press Enter the Digital Age* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2017), xxiii.

¹² John Anthony Maltese, Communications Strategies in the Bush White House, in *Assessing the George W. Bush Presidency: A Tale of Two Terms* (Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 216.

The second institutional change is that there is now a crisis of journalism within the United States. As technology has advanced and news dissemination has become more diverse in terms of sources and who puts out the news, journalism as a profession has come under attack. Most notably mainstream journalists and news organizations have come under attack for being “fake news” and having a liberal bias. This created wide distrust in news organizations that both political parties have attempted to take advantage of by creating their own narratives.

Authors Robert McChesney and John Nichols argue in their book *The Death and Life of American Journalism* that to understand our current crisis of journalism it is necessary to look to the history of the press. In a separate book McChesney examines the work of famous writer and intellectual Walter Lippmann. Lippmann saw journalism as the vital fourth estate within a democracy. In the 1920s he was a frequent critic of the media, as he saw professional journalism eroding into taking claims of government/those in power at face value even when there are grounds for skepticism.¹³ Rather, Lippmann believed that professional journalism is to be rooted in the ability to fact-check, contextualize, and critique information provided by the government. Instead, he saw the profession increasingly rely on opinion-based journalism which often did not provide or give an honest understanding of the news that could and often was driven by commercial and partisan motives. At its core, Lippmann believed that a crisis of democracy was a crisis of journalism and throughout the past three decades the United States is experiencing a crisis of democracy as the country battles strict partisan divide, and battles between the press and President that ultimately resulted in a crisis of journalism and a fight to control narratives.

¹³Robert McChesney, “Walter Lippmann and the Crisis of Journalism” in *Blowing the Roof off the Twentieth Century: Media, Politics, and the Struggle for Post-Capitalist Democracy*, (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 169.

All of the things that Walter Lippmann feared seemed to have become reality. Lippmann's "critique of a fatuous 'freedom' to basically lie with impunity in a fact-free world of spin and propaganda should send shivers down our spines. We have a large foot in that reality already, and we cannot afford to wait and see what happens if and when the other foot lands there as well."¹⁴ Lippmann saw the press as the vital fourth estate within the United States democracy and even went as far to say that institutions that produce journalism are public institutions. "It [newspapers] occupies a position in public life fully as important as the school system or the church or the organs of government."¹⁵ Taking it one step further Lippmann said "The news columns are common carriers. When those who control them arrogate to themselves the right to determine by their own consciences what shall be reported and for what purpose, democracy is unworkable."¹⁶

Lippmann's harrowing words resonate today so perfectly where, as technology has advanced and the news is no longer dominated by the big three networks, media businesses have transformed from content companies to audience companies that focus on crafting intensive relationships with their viewers.¹⁷ The perfect example of this is the creation Fox News. Fox News was founded in 1996 in an effort to create a "fair and balanced" news organization for people who were tired of the liberal media bias. One of the biggest reasons for Fox News' success is the Hostile Media Effect which is the tendency to perceive political news as antagonistic towards one's own personal views.¹⁸ Fox News's coverage accurately represents their audience's political views that allows for exacerbating conflict, victimization, and

¹⁴ McChesney, *Blowing the Roof off the Twenty-First Century*, 171.

¹⁵ Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, *A Test of the News* (Washington DC: New Republic, 1920), 4.

¹⁶ Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), 10-11.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Jones, "Fox News and the Performance of Ideology," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 180, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23253592>.

¹⁸ The Hostile Media Effect was first studied and proposed by Robert Vallone, Lee Ross, and Mark Lepper.

scapegoating. Furthermore, it created the idea of a struggle against liberal media bias, the Democratic Party, and those whom Fox News, and in turn their audience, deemed un-American. This struggle can be aided by repeated and continued viewing of Fox News.¹⁹ Ultimately, Fox News exploited an ongoing culture war that has been waged in the United States long before its creation, which resulted in a political divide so strict that civil political discourse is nearly impossible.

Since Fox News' creation in 1996 the television, internet, and print news environment has only become more complicated. With the creation of new professional, and non-professional, news networks audiences are now seeking out networks that mimic their own views which has led to a more polarized and radical political climate.

The rise of the internet has also significantly contributed to the rapidly deteriorating political climate over the past three decades. The creation of social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter have contributed to the polarization, while also making political views more extreme. Political scientists Jason Gainous and Kevin Wagner made a number of findings in their book *Tweeting to Power* about the use of social media in political elections. What they found is that increased use of digital media results in greater degrees of political engagement.²⁰ But, the results also indicate that those with extreme attitudes are more likely to engage in political activities and political candidates are pushed towards more extreme attitudes when they utilize social media.²¹ The findings of Gainous and Wagner also contribute to the two institutional changes discussed earlier. First, social media is contributing to the crisis of

¹⁹ Jones, *Fox News and the Performance of Ideology*, 180.

²⁰ Jason Gainous and Kevin Wagner, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 93.

²¹ Gainous and Wagner, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics*, 120 and 135.

journalism by profoundly altering who the drivers of news are. Increasingly, politicians are becoming the drivers of news content. Politicians going around, and sometimes contradicting, traditional media has greatly affected how news is covered and reacted too. Columbia scholars Lazarsfeld and Merton said “There is...concern with the present effects of the mass media upon their enormous audiences...particularly the possibility that the continuing assault of these media may lead to the unconditional surrender of critical faculties and unthinking conformism.”²²

Gainous and Wagner’s findings also give further insight into how the game of politics has changed with advancing technology. As mentioned, politicians are now becoming the drivers of news content on social media networks. Being able to instantly send out a message in under 140 characters to tens of thousands of people is unmatched in terms of speed and scope that traditional media has yet to catch up to. Since people with more extreme attitudes are more likely to use social media networks, they also tend to get their information directly from politicians or other non-traditional media. Often times this affirms their own political views through confirmation bias because any new information is being collected through channels that confirm one’s own political thoughts. This leads into a larger issue that has become known as “fake news,” which is used, most often, to discredit news that a person or politician does not agree with. Both of these issues can have extreme consequences because, as politicians are becoming drivers of news content their words are having a much stronger, and often more polarizing effect on the electorate. This can lead to more radical views, hate mobs attacking opposing politicians or people who disagree with them, and ultimately a more politically divided nation as a war over the “truth” is waged.

²² Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action,” 1948, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/50c6/e01e5e345853eab8bebec12b5d95b398f16a.pdf>.

The final way that social media and new media are transforming the game of politics is that social media is a two-way form of communication. In the past the only way to communicate with a politician would be to speak with them at a campaign or fundraiser event. Otherwise the only other way to hear directly from them would be on a television news network or the newspaper. With the rise of social media supporters and non-supporters have the ability to reply directly to the politician when they put out a message. Politicians do have the choice to reply to these people but there are potential benefits and detriments to these types of interactions. On the one hand, a non-supporter can reply and start a genuine and honest conversation over policy that can overall help propel the country forward. But on the other hand, and the scenario that happens more often, is when people begin to attack each other for their positions which ultimately has led to the extremely hostile and partisan political climate that the United States currently finds itself in.

Since the 1990s political discourse in the United States has been deteriorating at rapid rates, culminating in 2016 with the election of Donald Trump. In these three decades American's access to technology and information have greatly increased leading to less trust in traditional media outlets while also bringing new voices into political conversations, also continuing to enable the spread of disinformation to a much wider audience. As a result, Presidents have had to find new ways to communicate with the American people. The four most recent Presidents have utilized the permanent campaign to consistently be on the road gathering support for their policies. Furthermore, the rise of social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have transformed political communication. The result of all of this has had particular consequences for one historically significant position within the White House, the Press Secretary.

The White House Press Secretary has been swept up in the institutional collapse of traditional media and communication systems. The White House Press Secretary operates in an extremely unique environment where they must serve two masters. They must, on the one hand be fiercely loyal to the President to portray them, and the administration, in the best light. On the other hand, they must be an advocate for the press because if the press do not trust the information coming from the Press Secretary, they are ineffective. The position of being loyal to two masters has been undermined by placing fiercely loyal supporters of the President to regurgitate campaign slogans and stump speech lines. Ultimately, what this has done is contribute to the decline in discourse within the United States. Long gone are the days of the “Policy Adviser” Press Secretary, described by scholar William Spragens as “those who are so essential to the smooth working of their President’s White House management task that they serve in a kind of dual role—both Press Secretary and intimate adviser.”²³ Spragens goes on to say that the press is almost unanimous in their belief that the effectiveness of a Press Secretary is directly related to how close the Press Secretary is to the President. If the Press Secretary is close to the President then the media knows that the information they are given is credible and accurate. The ability for a Press Secretary to accurately portray the President’s views to the public has gotten significantly harder over the past three decades as the Age of Information continues to evolve.

Interestingly, as technology has evolved and become more complicated one would think that the Press Secretary’s job would become more important, but just the opposite has occurred. Most notably in the Trump administration, where no daily briefing was held for more than 400

²³ William Spragens and Carole Terwoord, *From Spokesmen to Press Secretary: White House Media Operations* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1980), 228.

days. But that is just the beginning, from Clinton to Trump the position of Press Secretary has been in decline in terms of function and importance. Undoubtedly, the Press Secretary is vital to both the White House and the Presidency but as former Clinton Press Secretary Mike McCurry said, “Give the White House Press Secretary a Makeover.”²⁴ McCurry goes on further to say that the Press Secretary needs to go back to the days when men like Jody Powell or Jim Hagerly were Press Secretaries. These men were effective managers of the White House Press Corps while also being a close confidant to the President, able to express the administration’s policies and schedule beyond reading a script. Over the past three decades a perfect storm of increasingly debased political discourse, the rise of new mass media, and presidential wars against the media, has made the White House Press Secretary an ineffective cog in a dysfunctional system.

Political historian Julian Zelizer identifies the 1980s as a pivotal point in the history of the Republican Party. With the election of Ronald Reagan, Zelizer describes the “conservative revolution finally gaining the holds of the levers of power.”²⁵ The revolution was propelled further by Georgia Congressman Newt Gingrich who rose quickly to power in the GOP because of his outright hatred of the Democrats and his “smashmouth style of partisanship which revolved around character assassination, violating norms, and tearing down governing institutions.”²⁶ During his years as Speaker of the House of Representatives, Gingrich made it his goal to derail the Clinton administration in any way he could, whether it was through conspiracy theories, rhetoric against the President and his allies, or straight up lying. Gingrich was hailed by his supporters for attacking the Democrats and wreaking havoc on a system that his supporters

²⁴ Mike McCurry, “Memorandum to the President Elect,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (December 2008): 702, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41219710>.

²⁵ Julian Zelizer, “How Newt Gingrich Laid the Groundwork for Trump’s Republican Party,” *Time Magazine*, July 7th, 2020, <https://time.com/5863457/how-newt-gingrich-laid-the-groundwork-for-trumps-republican-party/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

believed didn't work for the masses. Although Bill Clinton would certainly do significant damage to his own presidency, as technology advanced towards the twenty-first century strict partisan divide only got worse as it enabled and encouraged both parties to go around traditional media and spread their own narrative about current events.

President Bill Clinton profoundly changed the communications operation of the White House as it moved closer to the twenty-first century. Clinton was the first President to use the internet by sending an email to astronaut, John Glenn, who was aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery. This began the Age of Information for Presidents and their efforts to reach wider audiences. In addition, Bill Clinton was the first President to hold the daily press briefing live on television. Press Secretary at the time, Mike McCurry, brought in the television cameras because broadcast companies believed they were at a competitive disadvantage to their print competitors. In retrospect McCurry believes that this was a mistake, "...the daily briefing eventually became a silly theater of the absurd with all sides posturing for the cameras..."²⁷ Finally, President Clinton was the first President to have a female Press Secretary. Dee Dee Meyers had worked with Clinton in Arkansas for seven years prior to taking her position as Press Secretary. But Meyers was largely looked over during her short tenure, the daily briefing was often held by White House Communications Director George Stephanopoulos. Meyers has been characterized as disorganized and causing logistical headaches, but the first two years of the Clinton administration were defined by press mistakes and outbursts by a young, inexperienced President.

²⁷ Mike McCurry, Memorandum to the President Elect, 704.

Bill Clinton began his presidency in a position no President had found themselves in since before World War I. Throughout Clinton's presidency the United States would experience significant economic growth and peace which allowed Clinton to pursue an agenda that focused on health care reform, raising education standards, and improving the lives of middle class families. Albeit a gifted politician and policy-maker, Clinton related much better to the American public than the politicians and pundits in Washington. A Presidency that could have been defined by its' policy achievements was dragged down by constant scandals and battles with the media.

Prior to becoming President, the White House Press Corps, and the wider media were nervous about the former Arkansas Governor's victory. After a President, George H. W. Bush, that was known for his good relationship with the media, they would now have to start over with a candidate known for avoiding the media. As the new President was taking office, reporters were informed that their access to the White House would be restricted. The restrictions were later lifted but it began an uneasy relationship with the media, just as it began. In his early presidency, Clinton continued to go around the media, just as he did during the campaign, by holding town halls or going on talk shows. "The goal was no longer to influence Washington correspondents but to make them irrelevant."²⁸ As the Clinton presidency moved out of its infancy, the standards of journalism and the relationship between the press and President began to deteriorate that would ultimately derail the first peaceful presidency since World War I.

Six months into Clinton's presidency, and one day after hosting a barbecue to improve relations with the White House Press Corps, Ruth Bader Ginsburg was accepting her nomination to the Supreme Court when a reporter asked Clinton about the withdrawal of Lani Guinier and

²⁸Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Election 2000* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 186.

consideration of another judge for the opening on the high court. Clinton, enraged responded by saying, “I have long since given up the thought that I could disabuse some of you of turning any substantive decision into anything but a political process. How you could ask a question like that after the statement she just made is beyond me.”²⁹ The President had been visibly moved by the soon to be Supreme Court judge and was frustrated by the question, but the issue speaks to a broader problem within the Clinton White House during the early years of the administration, inexperience.

During the campaign Clinton was extremely adept in dealing with the new age media by taking appearances on numerous talk shows such as Oprah, and his famous appearance on the Arsenio Hall Show playing the saxophone. But once the Clintons arrived in Washington the landscape quickly changed. Clinton hired an extremely young and inexperienced communications team that had little to no experience working in Washington politics. The perfect example of this was the first female Press Secretary Dee Dee Meyers. In an interview for *Frontline* Meyers describes the chaotic first couple months of the new presidency. Saying that Clinton got no honeymoon or opportunity to showcase his agenda for the American people because of it was crisis after crisis, “America, here are the three things we're going to do first and then get off to start doing them. That didn't happen for months and months and months because we went right from one crisis to the other. It was the attorney general, to gays in the military, to budget fights about supplemental appropriations, and right from there into the haircut, you know?”³⁰ Meyers believes at the end of the day there were too many people handling the press at

²⁹ Howard Kurtz, “One Question too Many for Clinton,” *Washington Post*, June 15th, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/06/15/one-question-too-many-for-clinton/78bf8d36-345d-429e-8ade-299e97394f8e/>.

³⁰ Dee Dee Meyers, interview by Chris Bury, *PBS Frontline*, June 2000, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/clinton/interviews/myers.html>.

the beginning of the Clinton administration. Furthermore, scandals gave way for the opposing party to question the legitimacy of the Clinton presidency saying he was unfit for office or too inexperienced. As time would go on these attacks on Clinton's legitimacy would only get worse. With the numerous scandals, a communications team that was learning on the job, and constantly changing, and an accusatory opposing party, it would take the arrival of an experienced Washington communications expert to the White House to attempt to bring order.

Mike McCurry was the spokesmen for the State Department prior to accepting the position as Press Secretary, and had also served as director of communications for the Democratic National Committee in the late 1980s. McCurry brought decades of experience to the Clinton White House and he made an immediate effort to improve relations with the press. According to one correspondent the atmosphere "became much kinder and gentler."³¹ McCurry would bring new visibility to the White House Press Secretary that made some of his predecessors nervous. But with this new visibility, and bringing the briefing to live television, the Press Secretaries' word had more power and reached a wider audience, at times causing headaches for the President.

McCurry was one of the few Press Secretaries in the second half of the twentieth century to successfully be loyal to his two masters, pleasing both the President and the press. At the time, Jack Nelson of the *Los Angeles Times* ranked McCurry alongside Jody Powell and Marlin Fitzwater as some of the most successful Press Secretaries. Despite this, the Clinton administration continued to be bogged down by scandals, none bigger than the Monica Lewinsky Scandal that broke in 1998.

³¹ W. Dale Nelson, *Who Speaks for the President? The White House Press Secretary from Cleveland to Clinton* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 250.

An initial report of the affair between White House intern Monica Lewinsky and the President surfaced on January 17, 1998 but started to receive more widespread coverage on January 21st when the *Washington Post* ran an article about the secret relationship. The incident culminated in a statement given by the President, with his wife by his side, on January 26th where he famously said “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky.” What would transpire over the next year can only be described as a national crisis that included Grand Jury investigations, around the clock media coverage, and ultimately leading to the impeachment of Bill Clinton. Clinton would be acquitted by the Senate but his presidency would not recover from his extra-marital actions.

Beyond the Lewinsky scandal, another major shift was occurring in the United States. During the 1996 campaign Mike McCurry estimated “that a third to half of every story written about the 1996 campaign contained ‘some level of analysis’ by the reporter.”³² Author W. Dale Nelson describes McCurry’s comment as an overstatement, but it does speak to a larger shift that occurred during the Clinton presidency and has regressed further in the past two decades. The Lewinsky scandal highlights this shift perfectly, for example the CNBC show *Hardball with Chris Matthews* gave nearly its entire show to the scandal day after day.³³ As technology advanced and more access was given to the White House and President, thorough, investigative journalism transformed into punditry and speculation where every rumor became a story for the front page. The ultimate effect of this significantly contributed to the degradation of political discourse in the United States, as well as hurt the credibility of journalists whether they engaged in this sort of journalism or not.

³² W. Dale Nelson, *Who Speaks for the President?* 253.

³³ Louis Liebovich, *The Press and the Presidency*, 223.

The Clinton administration would never recover from the Lewinsky scandal and thus one of the most promising Presidents of the twentieth century ended rather quietly. Mike McCurry left office in 1998 after keeping Clinton afloat throughout the crisis. Deputy Press Secretary Joe Lockhart would take over for McCurry, but McCurry undoubtedly left his mark on the position. McCurry heralded wide praise both from his boss and the press. Clinton said, “In an age where Washington has come to be governed by a 24-hour news cycle and endless cable channels with their special niche audiences, Mike has redefined the job of press secretary in a new and more challenging era.”³⁴

The press and the presidency were entering a new era defined by the twenty-four hour news cycle and a press that was beginning to be more concerned with the story rather than the facts. Clinton’s presidency was something of a paradox, he was an extremely gifted politician and inherited an expanding economy in a period that virtually no other US President had found themselves in the twentieth century. Clinton had set goals of instituting health care reform, raising education standards, and improving the lives of middle class families but was consistently held back by his own mistakes and scandals. In addition, with people like Newt Gingrich leading the opposition, increasingly Washington would come to be defined by strict partisan divide and attempts at character assassination. Clinton rarely met with the press in his second term to avoid embarrassing questions. Furthermore, the administration was not able to take advantage of one of the most successful Press Secretaries of the twentieth century. Mike McCurry set the stage for the Press Secretaries to enter the twenty-first century. As the election of 2000 approached most

³⁴Elizabeth Shogren, “Spinmeister McCurry Leaving the Podium,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 24th, 1998, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-jul-24-mn-6814-story.html>.

Americans were ready to move on from the scandals and lies of the Clinton administration, despite approving of the President politically.³⁵

The United States was ready for a new start after the Clinton presidency, and with two seasoned political veterans running for President, it seemed as if the country was going to begin to heal from the divisiveness of the Clinton years. But the election of 2000 brought the country right back into disarray. On election night the electoral map began to fill out the way that most pundits had predicted with Democratic candidate Al Gore winning most of the northeast and west coast while Republican candidate George W. Bush was winning in small-town America. Early in the evening pundits began to call the state of Florida for the former Vice President, Gore, but around 10 p.m. Florida was put back into the undecided columns, and chaos began to ensue. Early the next morning, with Florida the only remaining state undecided, it was declared that Bush had won the state and thus surpassing the 270 electoral votes needed to win the election. But once again, pundits and media outlets across the nation had spoken too soon, even Al Gore had called Bush and conceded just to callback shortly after to recant his concession. Ultimately after much drama and speculation, the Supreme Court would step in and decide the fate of the new President. In a 5-4 ruling the high court decided that a recount is unconstitutional, making George W. Bush the 43rd President of the United States.

The chaos of Election 2000 and the media catastrophe that surrounded it represented a return to the chaos and divisiveness of the Clinton years. It meant a media that prioritized being the first to cover a story as opposed to being right about it. On election night CBS news anchor

³⁵ Polls taken by the Washington Post in April 1998, at the height of the impeachment controversy that found that 65 percent of those asked said they approved of the way President Clinton was handling the presidency, yet only 35 percent thought him honest and trustworthy and only 29 percent felt he had high personal moral and ethical standards. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27552372.pdf>

Dan Rather had said “We would rather be last than wrong.” After a presidency ridden with divisiveness and scandal, the campaign for the 43rd President was mostly civil. But as George W. Bush began his presidency he faced the monumental task of bringing together a nation that had previously fought over the impeachment of Bill Clinton, and now was going to inaugurate a President that lost the popular vote and, as some saw, was put into power by the Supreme Court.

George W. Bush would work diligently to move himself out of the shadow of his father. Bush would attempt to align himself closely with one of the most mythic figures in the Republican Party, Ronald Reagan. Both men set grand visions of America rooted in individual liberties and staunch conservatism. Bush, like Reagan, would institute tax reform and address hot button issues to cater to his base. But ultimately Bush would mimic some of Reagan’s worst qualities as President, most notably secrecy and deception. Reagan, nor Bush, would adopt the rhetoric of people like McCarthy or Gingrich but would continue to mislead the American public ultimately damaging political discourse and action in the United States.

Despite a rough start to the new presidency the press was excited for the son of the 41st President to come into office. George H. W. Bush was known for his friendliness and openness with the press, so there was reason to be optimistic for the former President’s son. But the reality was that George W. Bush would run his White House quite differently than his father. Bush would run his presidency based heavily off the permanent campaign championed by two of his closest advisors Karl Rove and Karen Hughes. This included many travel days and minor speeches given to targeted constituencies. By the end of 2001 *New York Times* magazine writer Ryan Lizza said that Bush had ushered in the “pressless presidency” going on to say that “the

press (more specifically the national press) does not matter to the administration's success."³⁶

This would become the modus operandi of the Bush White House for the next eight years. Bush would reduce the press office staff by more than half while only holding seventeen solo press conferences in his first term, compared to his father who held eighty-four in the same period.³⁷ Bush's less than forthcoming communication style made the job of his Press Secretaries very difficult, especially as the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. Overall, the Bush White House would continue the degradation of political discourse and the relationship between the press and President within the United States. By continuing, and expanding on, the permanent campaign the Bush White House made significant efforts to go around the traditional media, and deliberately withhold critical information that would ultimately hurt and mislead the American public as the United States invaded Iraq in 2003.

President Bush did not get much of a honeymoon to start his administration. Eight months into the new presidency the United States was struck with the biggest terrorist attack the country has ever seen. Prior to the attacks, the United States' foreign policy had not been focused on the Middle East, primarily it had been on China and Russia while debating on whether peace in the Middle East was worth the investment. Ultimately, little was done prior to September 11th. But as a response to the horrific events of September 11th, the Bush administration would launch the War on Terror that would see the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the deaths of thousands of Americans. But one of the most consequential actions of 9/11 and the subsequent

³⁶ Ryan Lizza, "The White House Doesn't Need the Press," *New York Times Magazine*, December 9th, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/09/magazine/the-year-in-ideas-a-to-z-the-white-house-doesn-t-need-the-press.html>.

³⁷ Martha Joynt Kumar, "Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation," (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 266.

War on Terror was the Bush administration's systematic effort to mislead the American public and conceal truths that could hurt the administration.

Initially, the President and his Press Secretary, Ari Fleischer, did a phenomenal job orchestrating the administration's response. They prioritized focusing on the victims of the terrible tragedy and making it known that the President would be doing everything in his power to help the families affected while also saying "Make no mistake: The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts."³⁸ Furthermore, Fleischer spun the President's words by saying "freedom and democracy are under attack. The American people need to know that we are facing a different enemy than we have ever faced..."³⁹ Fleischer also confirmed that the White House saw the attacks as "act of war." The President's approval rating would rise to an unprecedented 80% in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks. One of the most inspirational things that Bush did to let the nation know that it would heal from the tragedy was throwing out the first pitch at the New York Yankees baseball game, the first sporting event after the attacks. As the Bush administration moved on from the tragedy of the deaths of 3,000 Americans they began to draw plans up for an armed response.

Throughout 2002 the Bush administration ramped up its rhetoric that would lay the groundwork for an invasion into Iraq. Notably, Bush said that Iraq was part of an "Axis of Evil" that included countries like Iran and North Korea.⁴⁰ Rumors of Saddam Hussein possessing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) had been around since the Clinton administration and President Bush had received regular updates about the threat that they posed to the United States.

³⁸ George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President Upon Arrival at Barksdale Air Force Base," September 11th, 2011, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-1.html>.

³⁹ Klein, *All the President's Spokesmen*, 171.

⁴⁰ Klein, *All the President's Spokesmen*, 73

Towards the end of 2002, the administration's patience was wearing thin. At the podium, Press Secretary Ari Fleischer pronounced, in no uncertain terms, that the US believed, and had intelligence, that Saddam Hussein "has chemical and biological weapons, and he has missiles that can reach in excess of 150 kilometers..."⁴¹ The administration would put its foot down in early February 2003. On February 5th Secretary of State Colin Powell would present the United States' evidence about Saddam Hussein's WMDs saying "But, how much longer are we willing to put up with Iraq's noncompliance before we, as a council, we, as the United Nations say 'Enough. Enough.'"⁴² Just days earlier, January 28th, President Bush was giving his State of the Union address where he made the bold claim, that would come to haunt his administration for the next five years, "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."⁴³ These sixteen words would be the initial step towards bringing the United States to war. These words would also begin a systematic effort by the administration to mislead the American public. Author Woody Klein said this about the Bush administration's communication operation, "The Iraq War...provides some of the best examples of how an administration spins a war until it runs out of ways to do it and the facts belie what the press secretary is saying."⁴⁴

On March 19th, 2003 the United States launched the war in Iraq. On May 1st, 2003 the President would hold an event on top of an aircraft carrier that would once again come to haunt

⁴¹ "Fleischer Speaks on Iraq's Need to Comply with U.N. Resolution," CNN, transcript, aired January 7th, 2003, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0301/07/bn.02.html>.

⁴² Secretary of State Colin Powell, "U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell Addresses the U.N. Security Council," February 5th, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030205-1.html>.

⁴³ George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 28th, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

⁴⁴ Woody Klein, *All the President's Spokesmen: Spinning the News – White House Press Secretaries from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 69.

his administration for the rest of his time in office. The President rode in on a Navy airplane and declared that "...the United States and our Allies have prevailed." He would go on to say that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended."⁴⁵ Bush's comments made standing in front of a large sign stating "Mission Accomplished" would come to haunt the administration. The whole event speaks to a few different things that the Bush administration did in an attempt to improve press relations while selling the Iraq War to the American people.

One of the ways that the Bush administration sold the Iraq War was through stagecraft. Stagecraft was something that President Ronald Reagan had used heavily through his eight years in office and Bush decided implement the same strategy. Bush in front of the "Mission Accomplished" sign aboard the Navy aircraft carrier would be just one of many efforts by the President's team to enhance the President's image and message while on television. Bush would be seen regularly behind large signs that stated the message he was trying to get across whether it be about jobs, taxes, or border security. Scott Sforza led the team focused on enhancing the President's image on TV, "I sort of use the rule of thumb, if the sound were turned down on the television when you are just passing by, you should be able to look at the TV and tell what the president's message is."⁴⁶

The other main way that the Bush administration sold the Iraq War was the way he managed the crisis of 9/11 and the period thereafter. Scott McClellan, Deputy Press Secretary at the time that would eventually replace Ari Fleischer as Press Secretary, believes that the way Bush managed the crisis "almost guaranteed that the use of force would become the only feasible

⁴⁵ George W. Bush, "President Bush Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended," May 1st, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-15.html>.

⁴⁶ Martha Joynt Kumar, *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2010).

option.”⁴⁷ Bush did this by, himself or other top administration officials giving speeches to the UN, and a massive arms and military buildup. McClellan describes the momentum that the President created made it very difficult to oppose the war because the war was “fait accompli.” Finally, and ultimately most consequential to the image of the Bush presidency, by making the key reason for going to war weapons of mass destruction, the White House was able to delay any conversations about long-term strategy for the invasion.⁴⁸ As the years went on the Bush administration would be plagued by these issues simply because they failed to think about them in the first place. The administration became hyper-focused on a short-term goal rather than focusing on what was best for the nation as it healed from the most deadly terror attack in history. The Press Secretaries of the administration would continually be asked about the “Mission Accomplished” moment throughout Bush’s remaining five years in office. The Iraq War would, much like the Lewinsky Scandal, derail the presidency and make the Bush administration increasingly hostile toward the media.

In 2004, *New Yorker* writer Ken Auletta wrote “What seems new with the Bush White House is the unusual skill that it has shown in keeping much of the press at a distance while controlling the news agenda.”⁴⁹ In an interview about the article quoted above, Auletta differentiated the Bush White House’s relationship with the media in two ways. The first is that the administration was very disciplined, most of the aides were from Texas who had no loyalty to the Washington press so the only person they were loyal to was President Bush. The second way the Bush White House was different was that very few people spoke off the record to

⁴⁷ Scott McClellan, *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington’s Culture of Deception* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 143.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 143.

⁴⁹ Ken Auletta, “Fortress Bush: How the White House Keeps the Press Under Control,” *The New Yorker*, January 12th, 2004, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/01/19/fortress-bush>.

reporters because it was seen as leaking information and by all accounts this was the biggest sin with President Bush.⁵⁰ The Bush administration went to great lengths to attack and discredit the media, but the issue goes beyond just reporters being ignored. The administration made it significantly more difficult to obtain information or documents about a number of different issues. Most notably the Presidential record of Ronald Reagan and Bush's father, George H. W. Bush. Furthermore, Bush reversed a Clinton policy about FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests that gave the administration full reign over which documents they were allowed to release to reporters or the public. One of the most puzzling things about the Bush administration's relationship with the media was the coverage in the lead up to the Iraq War, where the media seemed to blindly agree and follow the administration's words and actions.

In a two week period leading up to the war in Iraq, ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS hosted just one guest out of 267 who questioned the intentions of going to war in Iraq.⁵¹ Furthermore, in other journalism dissenting voices were included but they were often buried in articles that were headlined by President Bush's, or those close to him, analysis. University of Maryland professor of media and international affairs Susan Moeller believes that the media followed the administration's focus on the dangers of terrorism in the wake of 9/11. The reality of 9/11 was that box cutters and commercial planes were used, not vials of small pox or dirty bombs.⁵² The ultimate effect of the media blindly following the administration's narrative about WMDs was

⁵⁰ Ken Auletta, "Bush's Press Problem," interview by Daniel Cappello, *The New Yorker Magazine*, January 12th, 2004, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/01/19/bushs-press-problem>.

⁵¹ Matt Taibbi, "16 Years Later, How the Press that Sold the Iraq War got Away with it," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, March 22nd, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/iraq-war-media-fail-matt-taibbi-812230/>.

⁵² Susan Moeller, "Weapons of Mass Destruction and the Media: Anatomy of a Failure," *Yale Global Online*, April 14th, 2004, <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/weapons-mass-destruction-and-media-anatomy-failure>.

the failure to calculate the risks and costs of going to war in search of something that no inspection had previously found.

The Bush White House would eventually reach historic lows on public approval as the hunt for WMDs never found anything of value, meanwhile American soldiers were dying daily. The media's narrative quickly shifted against the President and his Iraq policies, in response the administration doubled down on their efforts to conceal and hide information from the press and American public. President Bush would go through four Press Secretaries throughout his eight years in office, his two longest serving Ari Fleischer and Scott McClellan have written books about their experience in the White House and as Press Secretary. McClellan has been particularly outspoken about the Bush White House and the use of the permanent campaign through Bush's tenure as President. Furthermore, Bush's insistence on keeping his Press Secretaries less than informed ultimately damaged not only the Press Secretaries relationship with the media, but also the administration itself. McClellan describes games of "twenty questions" with top advisors to get even an ounce of key information as it was developing. McClellan believes that the ultimate shortfall of the Bush presidency was its secrecy, and he believes the secrecy is at the heart of the permanent campaign strategy that the past four presidents have all engaged in. "...the campaign mentality at times led the president and his chief advisers to spin, hide, shade, and exaggerate the truth, obscuring nuances and ignoring the caveats that should have accompanied their arguments. Rather than choosing to be forthright and candid, they chose to sell the war, and in doing so they did a disservice to the American people and to our democracy."⁵³

⁵³ McClellan, *What Happened*, 309.

Ari Fleischer, Bush's first Press Secretary, seems to have taken a different tone in his memoir about his experiences in the Bush White House. While McClellan was critical of the administration and its governing style and handling of the Iraq War, Fleischer praised his former boss while being critical of the media. He believes that the media is contrast driven instead of information driven, meaning the media attempt to contrast the President's words with stories that show the opposite. Instead Fleischer says "Why can't they report both statements, giving readers and viewers a more accurate, richer context to controversial events? What's wrong with reporting the death of a serviceman...while warning that Iraq remained dangerous?"⁵⁴ At the end of the day, Fleischer believes that the press is too conflict driven and if a fight is not occurring then the press attempt to stir one up. Fleischer also discusses perceived liberal bias, saying often times the reporters end up on the side of the democrats because most of them are democrats and "no profession can be as ideologically unbalanced as the press without it seeping into their work."⁵⁵ Fleischer is resolute in his belief that he and the President did not mislead the public as the United States began war in Iraq, instead Fleischer believes that it was a failure of the intelligence community and not the propaganda machine that created no other option than war in Iraq.

Ultimately, the Bush administration, much like Clinton, would do great damage to both the relationship between the press and the President and political discourse in the United States. The entire administration made an effort to be less than forthcoming with the media on things such as simple policy issues all the way to the Iraq War and the search for WMDs. The administration's excuse for their silence with the press was that administration preferred to stay

⁵⁴ Ari Fleischer, *Taking Heat: The President, The Press, and My Years in the White House* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 85.

⁵⁵ Fleischer, *Taking Heat*, 122.

focused on governing. But as the Iraq War continued on with little to show for its efforts the country, and the press, began to resent the administration for misleading them to a costly and deadly war. When the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction delivered its report they called the hunt for WMDs the “most public—and most damaging—intelligence failures in recent American history.”⁵⁶ This led Bush’s Press Secretaries to go in front of the press every day and deal with an increasingly hostile media further eroding the relationship between the press and presidency. Bush’s Press Secretaries were close to the President and had good access to him but were often left out of the key decision-making processes which hurt their credibility when talking to the press. Much like the Clinton administration the war and its consequences derailed the entire presidential agenda, and by the end of his eight years Bush had accomplished less than he had hoped. As the 2008 election drew closer, the United States was once again looking forward to a new President that would be more forthcoming in their governing while leading the nation out of an extremely costly war.

Despite all of the divisiveness and pain caused by the Clinton and Bush administrations, neither of them could compare to the divided nation that was created in the wake of the election of Barack Obama in 2008. In the eight years Obama was in office the country seemingly descended into disarray in the form of strict partisan divide. The conservative media echo-chamber declared war on the Obama administration and vociferously opposed any and all legislation put forth by the first African-American President in United States history. Furthermore, the Republican opposition failed to recognize the legitimacy of President Obama by, on the one hand proclaiming that racism in America was gone because an African-American

⁵⁶ Klein, *All the President's Spokesmen*, 81.

was elected as President, but on the other championing conspiracy theories such as Obama not being an American citizen. Technological advances, aided by the conservative echo-chamber enabled these views to be widespread and extremely damaging to political discourse and Obama's presidency. Obama entered office proclaiming that he would have the most transparent administration in American history, but by all accounts he failed. *Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie Jr. said "The administration's war on leaks and other efforts to control information are the most aggressive I've seen since the Nixon administration."⁵⁷

President Bill Clinton has been deemed the first internet President, but the reality is that Clinton rarely ever used digital technology. After sending the first presidential email, Clinton himself did not use the technology again in office or after. It was not until Obama's campaign for President in 2008 that the internet was utilized in effective way to mobilize voters, and for the candidate to speak directly to the American people. Obama's use of social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were a major deciding factor in the election where Obama boasted 23 times the number of followers on Twitter than Republican nominee John McCain, and four times as many Facebook supporters.⁵⁸ Obama transitioned his social media strategy from the campaign to his governing style, adding a new weapon to the permanent campaign governing style defined by his two predecessors.

Obama believed he was speaking directly to the American people through his social media strategy. He would often intentionally go around traditional media to post his own content or create new media content such as his famous interview with actor Zach Galifianakis on the

⁵⁷ Leonard Downie Jr., "The Obama Administration and the Press," Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed July 17th, 2020, <https://cpj.org/reports/2013/10/obama-and-the-press-us-leaks-surveillance-post-911/>.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Aaker and Victoria Chang "Obama and the Power of Social Media and Technology," Case No. M321, (California: Graduate School of Stanford Business, 2009), 1-2. <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/case-studies/obama-power-social-media-technology>.

YouTube show *Between Two Ferns*. “The result...” Reid Cherlin, who worked in the Obama press operations for two years, “...six years into the Obama term, is that the administration and the press are in essence tweeting past each other, even as each decries its treatment at the hands of the other.”⁵⁹ Although Obama would stop short of declaring an all-out war on the press, the relationship between the press and the presidency during the Obama years were extremely contentious that ultimately resulted in Obama speaking to the White House Press Corps a third as often as President Bush did and less than a fifth as often as Clinton.⁶⁰ Instead Obama would participate in numerous one-on-one interviews with carefully selected journalists outside the Press Corps. The Obama presidency marks a significant transformation that had been building since the Clinton administration, where the press and the President operate largely in contention with each other both providing different narratives of current events. The President who had proclaimed he would be the most transparent in US history would do much harm to press freedom during his eight years in office.

The *Columbia Journalism Review* states three ways that Obama undermined press freedom. First, the administration virtually declared war on leaks that ensnared journalists. The government designated providing classified information to the media as espionage. The administration then took it a step further and subpoenaed and surveilled journalists during their investigations into the government leaks. The second way that the Obama undermined press freedom was their fight to keep information classified. The *Review* sites the Justice Department’s “drone memo” as an example of something that the government worked to overclassify to

⁵⁹ Reid Cherlin, “The Presidency and the Press,” *Rolling Stone*, August 4th, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-presidency-and-the-press-74832/>.

⁶⁰ Stephanie Martin, ed., *Columns to Characters: The Presidency and the Press Enter the Digital Age* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2017), x.

prevent the public from viewing. Finally, the administration, through the NSA, routinely monitored electric communications of journalists that inhibited their ability to communicate with sources confidently.⁶¹

At the time of Barack Obama's presidency, it was seen as the culmination of nearly two decades of partisan warfare. He entered the Oval Office with a grand vision for transforming America "that's more determined, more competitive, better positioned for the future—an America where we out-innovate, we out-educate, we out-build the rest of the world..."⁶² Obama was able to achieve major policy breakthroughs but ultimately between his battles against the press, the conservative echo-chamber, and both houses of Congress controlled by Republicans, Obama's accomplishments were diminished, through propaganda campaigns and disinformation. This led Stephanie Martin, professor political communications at Southern Methodist University, to say this about the potential for Presidents in the twenty-first century, "the possibility for launching a transformative, reconstructive presidency has lessened."⁶³ Obama, and his two predecessors, all set out grand plans for transformative presidencies but each, in their own way, failed to do so and a major factor in that is the different interests groups that have the ability to exert pressure on various constituencies throughout the United States, profoundly changing how the President is perceived, does their job, and is covered by the press.

Obama inherited the worst financial disaster since the Great Depression, the Iraq War, a press that had grown increasingly frustrated with the Bush administration's secrecy, and a

⁶¹ Joel Simon, "Barack Obama's Press Freedom Legacy," Columbia Journalism Review, accessed July, 17th, 2020, https://www.cjr.org/criticism/barack_obamas_press_freedom_legacy.php.

⁶² Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Families USA Health Action Conference," Obama White House Archives, (January 28th, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/28/remarks-president-families-usa-health-action-conference>.

⁶³ Stephen Skowronek *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 32.

Republican party that refused to work with him on nearly every issue. But to make matters worse Obama was consistently attacked by the far-left of his own party for not being more bold in his policies. In one of the first comprehensive books about the Obama administration, *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment*, editor Julian Zelizer describes Obama as a “very effective policymaker but not a tremendously successful party builder.”⁶⁴ The data confirms this statement, the Democratic Party would lose control over more legislative seats nationwide under Obama than any other President in modern history.⁶⁵ Some pundits and scholars attempt to place blame on Obama for his lack of successful policymaking, while others attempt to absolve him due to the political climate. Ultimately, President Obama attempted to take matters into his own hands, by circumventing his own party, the opposing party, and traditional media, he would create a social media empire to speak directly to the American people.

One result of this is that Obama’s Press Secretaries were relatively unknown, which isn’t always a bad thing for Press Secretaries. One of the signs of a good Press Secretary is not making news themselves and allowing the President’s message to be broadcasted in the best possible light. Obama would have three men serve as his Press Secretaries throughout his eight years in office, Jay Carney, Robert Gibbs, and Josh Earnest all faithfully served the President and held the daily briefings like clockwork, but were often overshadowed by the President’s ventures outside the traditional media. Notably, Obama gave his Press Secretaries access to him when they required it, Josh Earnest said that if he had any questions before a briefing Obama would

⁶⁴ Julian Zelizer, ed., *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), 6.

⁶⁵ “Changes in State Legislative Seats during the Obama Presidency,” Ballotpedia, last modified January 31, 2017, https://ballotpedia.org/Changes_in_state_legislative_seats_during_the_Obama_presidency.

make sure to answer them, so he would not have to go to the podium uninformed. This is a marked difference between Clinton and Bush's relationships with their Press Secretaries whom were often left out of a lot of key decision making conversations. Undoubtedly, Obama's Press Secretaries would make mistakes but the fact that they were consistently informed directly by the President made their relationship with the press more cordial. Meanwhile, the press directed most of their frustration towards the President who consistently undermined them.

At the end of eight years in office, President Obama was tired of partisan gridlock, frustrated by an antagonistic press, and defeated because of a largely ineffective presidency. In 2008, when the first African-American President took office, the United States was extremely optimistic about its future after the two previous presidencies were defined by scandal and divisiveness. Obama had created an amazing grassroots effort to bring him into office but was largely ineffective when it came to continuing that grassroots support while in office. He had promised to be the most transparent President in United States history but Obama did more to undermine the press in his eight years than nearly any other President. Presidents have always searched for ways to go around the traditional media to speak directly to the American people. In the Information Age this process had been made easier with the rise of social media. Barack Obama's campaign and presidency are the culmination of decades of partisan warfare and a degrading relationship between the press and President but Obama's legacy will only be able to be understood in the context of his successor, Donald Trump.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 was a historic one. It was the first time in the United States that a President was elected with no prior political experience. Furthermore, the election put in place an extremely polarizing figure in Donald Trump who had proven that it was his goal to, intentionally or not, wreak havoc on the traditional institutions and systems that

Presidents abide by. One of the most consequential areas that President Trump has done this in, is his administrations relationship with the media. Despite the previous three Presidents having less than stellar relationships with the media, Donald Trump has taken these contentious relationships and declared a virtual war on the media. Obama used social media in extremely innovative ways to get elected and gain support for his policies but Donald Trump, and his use of Twitter, has taken the use of social media in politics to another level. Through his social media account, that now boasts more than 80 million followers, Trump has repeatedly spread lies, disinformation, and even attacked American politicians, celebrities, and others who disagree with his rhetoric and policies. This has not only hurt Trump's credibility within the United States, but around the world. Ultimately, what this has created is a crisis of democracy in the United States, and in turn, as Walter Lippmann would agree, a crisis in journalism as well.

In a Tweet quoted earlier, President Trump said that the media was the "enemy of the American people," a line that he has since repeated on multiple of occasions. Furthermore, Trump has, numerous times, called the mainstream media "fake news" that has significantly hurt the credibility of reporting and journalism within the United States. Americans now have to question the validity of nearly everything they read, and more often than not the "truth" for a person and what new sources they believe are correct, are politically aligned. For Donald Trump, and many of his supporters, their main source of "truthful" news is Fox News that has repeatedly touted conspiracy theories, such as the birther conspiracy about President Obama, and other disinformation campaigns targeted most often at the Democratic Party. Furthermore, most Presidents give interviews to a variety of news outlets, but as Trump's term has gone on he has almost exclusively given interviews to Fox. But it is not Trump's catering to Fox News that has

created the crisis in journalism, it is his use of Twitter. Trump has taken the job of White House Press Secretary into his own hands through Twitter.

Between March 11th, 2019 and May 1st, 2020, not one of Trump's three Press Secretaries, there are four in total, in that period stepped to the podium to give a White House daily press briefing. That is 417 days where the press was not informed about the President's agenda and schedule, but more importantly they were not able to question the Press Secretary about the President's statements and actions. The White House press briefing and in turn the Press Secretary have become vital functions of democracy within the United States. It is a time, each day, where the press have the ability to hold the Presidential administration accountable for their actions, and to ask questions about events in the United States and around the world. It is vitally important for electorate to have access to information like the briefing because governing is not supposed to be easy, or able to cut corners. Without the briefing, Trump has been able to control his own narrative and spread constant lies and disinformation through the use of Twitter with little room for people, or institutions, to hold him accountable, which ultimately has greatly damaged the country and furthered the political divide.

There is historical precedent to show that this has been an increasing pattern in presidential history, where Presidents are going outside of traditional media to create their own content to bypass the fourth estate. From Bill Clinton avoiding the media his entire second term to avoid being held accountable for the numerous scandals he engaged in. To President George W. Bush embarking on a consistent propaganda campaign of disinformation leading the United States into a costly and deadly war that did not find weapons of mass destruction, destabilized the Middle East, and killed thousands of American soldiers. For President Obama it was the proclamation that he would be the most transparent President in history, only to then spy on

reporters and withhold information from the public, ultimately speaking to reporters less than his two predecessors. Trump embodies the perfect storm that all three of the previous Presidents have been creating over the past three decades. Political divisiveness, trust in media, and the relationship between the press and President are all at their highs and lows and the American people are the ones who have suffered most.

Looking to the future, politicians and journalists must do better to prioritize less conflict, and providing accurate information so an informed electorate can make the best decision. Politicians, especially the President, needs to be held accountable for their words and actions. One of the ways this is done is through the daily press briefing which needs to resume for the benefit of democracy and journalism. The Age of Information has brought tremendous strain, challenges, and divisiveness to politics within in the United States. As America continues to develop in the social media age, tremendous work will need to be done to improve government transparency, access to information, and journalism that prioritizes facts over conflict.

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